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ABSTRACT

In 2001, the National Education Goals Panel commissioned researchers from Vanderbilt University to study the consistent high achievement of African American and Latino students in Department of Defense schools. This digest summarizes the results of their study and presents supporting research that identifies policies and practices that may contribute to the success of these schools. The digest highlights assessment results and achievement gap comparisons, student demographics, and conditions in the academic and social environment of Department of Defense schools that appear to contribute to student academic development. Among these are many in- and out-of-school efforts: DoD commitment and expectations; establishment of goals; effective resource deployment; a culture of high expectations; small school size; flexibility of organization; data-driven decision-making; teacher quality and professional development; pre-school and after school programs; community involvement; alignment between central direction and local decisions; and focus on, and expectations of, high achievement. (SM)

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DIGEST

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RAISING MINORITY ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE MODEL

The U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), a civilian agency of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), operates two separate but parallel education systems: the Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DoDDS) for children of personnel stationed in Europe and the Pacific, and the Department of Defense Domestic Dependent Elementary and Secondary Schools (DDESS) for children living on bases in the U.S.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national, ongoing assessment of student performance, the average academic performance of all students in DoDEA schools is high, and the performance of African American and Hispanic students is among the highest in the nation. Based on this evidence of success and the fact that DoDEA schools share some of the same characteristics of many of the nation's public schools, a research group at Vanderbilt University examined the high achievement of African American and Hispanic students in DoDEA schools. This digest will summarize the results of their study, *March toward Excellence: School Success and Minority Student Achievement in Department of Defense Schools* (Smrekar, Guthrie, Owens, & Sims, 2001), along with supporting research identifying policies and practices that may contribute to the success of DoDEA schools.

Assessment Results

The DoDEA instructional program provides a competitive comprehensive pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade curriculum and monitors student progress through the use of standardized tests. DoDEA schools, specifically DDESS schools, were second in the nation in writing on the NAEP 1998 assessment, with 38% of all students scoring at or above the proficient level. The DDESS school system has a higher percentage of African American and Hispanic students than the national average. African American and Hispanic DoDEA students outperformed their peers in all states except Maine and Connecticut on eighth grade reading and writing NAEP tests. Though achievement gaps persist between white and minority students, the racial/ethnic academic performance gap is far narrower for DoDEA students than for students nationwide (Smrekar, et al., 2001).

Students at DoDEA schools also take the Terra Nova Achievement Test, a norm-referenced test for grades three through eleven. Though comparisons by race and ethnicity between DoDEA subgroups and national subgroups cannot be made with Terra Nova scores, results showed a high overall performance for students in DoDEA schools and for African American and Hispanic students in particular (Smrekar, et al., 2001).

Student Demographics

Students of color account for 40 percent of DoDEA enrollment, a percentage similar to the proportion in New York State public schools. Roughly 50 percent of all DoDEA students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, reflecting the typically low pay scales in the military. Because housing on military bases is based on rank, and school attendance areas are geographically determined (as are public school districts), the concentration of low-income students can vary significantly from school to school (Smrekar et al., 2001).

Military assignments cause frequent family moves, resulting in a mobility rate for DoDEA schools of 35 percent, comparable to the rate in inner-city schools. Parents in the military often have only a modest education: 94 percent of the children of enlisted personnel, who comprise about 80 percent of the DoDEA school population, have parents with no more than a high school education (Smrekar et al., 2001). Finally, single parent households account for 6.2 percent of all military families, compared with a national rate of 27 percent (Military Family Resource Center, 2001; Fields & Casper, 2001).

Factors Promoting Student Achievement

March toward Excellence found that the military setting in which DoDEA schools operate fosters student achievement in particular ways, but other factors were also found to have a decisive impact on the success of DoDEA schools. Among these essential components are:

- **Department of Defense Commitment and Expectations.** The culture of order, discipline, and training in the military community creates ideal conditions for schools with high expectations. The DoDEA demonstrates a commitment to public education that is substantive and responsive to parents. Parents are likewise responsible for active involvement (e.g., parent teacher conferences and volunteering) in their children's education.

- **Focus on High Academic Achievement.** The emphasis on high academic rigor in DoDEA schools is based upon principles of school success described by Miles and Darling-Hammond (1997): (1) replacing specialized programs with an integrated plan to serve students in regular classrooms; (2) shared planning time to develop curriculum; (3) targeted student groupings designed to meet individual needs and enable personal relationships; (4) modified school schedules to permit more varied and longer blocks of instructional time; and (5) creatively redesigned roles and work hours for staff to help meet goals .

- **Flexibility of Organization.** DoDEA assures continuity within the system by determining curriculum standards by subject area and grade. At the local level, schools can modify their class schedules and teaching approaches. Teacher teams design and align curricula and determine varying approaches for struggling students within academically heterogeneous groupings.

- **Establishment of Goals.** DoDEA uses a Community Strategic Planning Process for determining specific educational, administrative, and financial decisions. Stakeholders—including parents, faculty, administrators, support personnel, community leaders, and military personnel—provide input that greatly

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influences the process. The 1995-2000 Community Strategic Plan (CSP) was jointly generated from the eight goals established by the National Education Goals Panel and the DoDEA goals regarding governance and organizational infrastructure. Local schools subsequently develop their own School Improvement Plans and actively decide how they will achieve the CSP's objectives.

- **Alignment between Central Direction and Local Decisions.** This approach enables local and professional capacity building as well as a partnership between DoDEA headquarters and parents, teachers, and staff. DoDEA schools are characterized by the alignment of curricular goals, pedagogy, teacher support, accountability systems, and performance assessments. The bi-directional flow of data also enables formative and summative decision-making.

- **Data-Driven Decision Making.** Districts and schools are provided with detailed analyses of student performance, disaggregated by grade level, gender, and race. These data enable teachers and staff to evaluate changes in student performance, determine relevant goals, devise further assessments, and coordinate curriculum and professional development.

- **Teacher Quality and Professional Development.** Teachers have considerable leverage in shaping policies and activities to achieve curriculum goals and performance objectives. They receive a great deal of high-quality professional development, with a strong emphasis on training designed to address the individual needs of schools as determined by student performance on standardized tests.

- **A Culture of High Expectations.** According to the 1998 NAEP reading test, 85 percent of African American students and 93 percent of Latino students surveyed believed that their teachers' expectations were "very positive" (the highest ranking), compared to 52 percent and 53 percent, respectively, in the national sample (Smrekar et al., 2001). In addition, discipline plans are promptly implemented and parents are aware that their children's school may contact their commanding officers.

- **Effective Resource Deployment.** DoDEA schools spend approximately $8,900 per pupil, $1,600 (22 percent) more than the national average. This figure is, however, considerably less than average per-pupil expenditures in large U.S. school systems that have comparable proportions of minority students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). DoDEA teachers receive somewhat higher salaries than their U.S. public school peers, though compensation is comparable to the income of their peers. In addition, materials and instructional supplies are usually available and physical facilities are more than adequate in DoDEA schools (Smrekar et al., 2001).

- **Small School Size.** Research on school reform suggests small schools (fewer than 350 elementary school students, 600 middle school students, and 900 high school students) enable increased academic achievement and positive teacher/student interaction. Small schools also seem to benefit low socioeconomic status and minority students most (Lee & Smith, 1997). Middle schools and high schools in the DoDEA are generally smaller than average middle and high schools in most states (NCES, 2000).

- **Pre-School and After-School Programs.** Considered a model with regard to staff training, educational programming, and physical facilities, DoDEA's preschool and after-school programs meet the guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC), and the National School-Age Care Association (NSACA). The DoDEA model is an example of Gordon's concept of supplementary education, which recognizes the health, human, cultural, polity, and social capital required to successfully enable academic achievement (1999).

- **Community Involvement.** DoDEA schools are situated within military base compounds that value principles of accountability, commitment, and discipline. DoDEA schools share aspects of "community organized" schools, also found in Catholic and magnet schools, which encourage communication among teachers, staff, and students; enable social membership; and make the commitment to common goals the norm (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993).

Conclusion

It may not be possible in non-Department of Defense schools to duplicate the conditions and characterisitcs of DoDEA schools. There are, however, lessons to be learned from these schools concerning the importance of high expectations, research-based information for decision-making, centralized direction and adaptable decentralized implementation, and the active use of supplementary education. Also crucial in the success of DoDEA students and schools is the sense among students, parents, and employers of shared values and shared responsibility for outcomes.

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